DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 745 CS 504 757

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TITLE Teaching Nonverbal Communication from a Humanities Perspective.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
JOURNAL CIT Perspectives: The Journal of the Association for General and Liberal Studies; v14 n1 p13-16 Win 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Awareness; *Educational Needs; Higher Education; *Humanities; *Human Relations; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Interpersonal Relationship; Liberal Arts; *Nonverbal Communication; Personal Autonomy; Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

The amorphous nature of nonverbal study can benefit from the unifying yet pluralistic perspective of the humanities and liberal arts. Those who teach, write, and create under the broad rubric of the humanities appreciate the complexity of human life and try to honor the subtle and the special in human actions and creations. When addressed from this perspective, nonverbal behaviors can be seen as clues to individual complexity rather than as descriptors that can be "read." When guided by a humanities perspective, a student of nonverbal behavior can learn that the only label which accurately describes any person is complex. By avoiding generalizations and honoring individual complexities, a student can go beyond hasty certainties and achieve cautious awareness. When approached from a humanities perspective, the study of nonverbal communication can also enhance the ability to pause, choose a response, and achieve freedom from external stimuli. By encouraging the awareness that allows choice, the study of nonverbal patterns can further the arts of freedom--and thus serve the best tradition of the humanities. Consciousness of nonverbal patterns can also increase cross-cultural understanding. In addition, the application of research into nonverbal processes can enhance the quality of human life. At best, a humanities perspective can help a student respect the symbols and extensions of individual lives. (HOD)

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ED250745

TEACHING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION FROM A HUMANITIES PERSPECTIVE

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Published by: Perspectives: The Journal of The Association for General and Liberal Studies, 14, No. 1 (Winter 1984).

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Three decades ago, Aldous Huxley lamented that nonverbal processes were overlooked in academic study because this nebulous mixture of behaviors, rituals, images, and symbols does not resolve neatly into any one discipline. Huxley wrote:

> this matter of education in the nonverbal humanities will not fit into any of the established pigeonholes. It is not religion, not neurology, not gymnastics, not morality or civics, not even experimental psychology. This being so the subject is, for academic . . . purposes, non-existent and may safely be ignored altogether or left, with a patronizing smile, to those whom the Pharisees of verbal orthodoxy call cranks, quacks, charlatans and unqualified amateurs.[1]

Fortunately, even as Huxley made that statement, work was progressing in several disciplines which could eventually be linked into a larger whole. Although there have been "unqualified amateurs" who have grown rich from their paperback, grocery-counter books on body language, much serious work has also been done in recent years. We can now draw from Edward Hall's work in anthropology, from Susanne Langer and Ray Birdwhistell in linguistics, from Robert Sommer in sociology, from Marshall Klaus in medicine, from Vincent Scully in architecture--to name only a few. A mass of information has emerged which describes not only body language, but also the sounds and silences which punctuate verbal communication, spatial arrangements and environmental influences, tactile sensations, and visual literacy.

As separate areas of study have matured, Huxley's call for an interdisciplinary view remains relevant, lest the whole be lost in a preoccupation with its parts. The amorphous nature of nonverbal study can benefit from the unifying yet pluralistic perspective of the humanities and liberal arts. Although definitions vary widely, there is implicit agreement that teachers of humanities and liberal studies observe few boundaries. The humanities

have been called "the arts of freedom"[2] and liberal education affirms that learning is "more than information, or skill, or propaganda."[3]

Consistent with these definitions, a collegiate course which treats nonverbal systems from a humanities perspective seeks insights which can improve human life, and--to that end--interprets and applies the findings of the various disciplines. Following are some premises in which such a course might be grounded.

1. Knowledge of nonverbal communication should increase awareness, but decrease certainty. Those who teach and write and create under the broad rubric of the humanities appreciate the complexity of human life, and try to honor the subtle and the special in human actions and creations. When addressed from this perspective, nonverbal behaviors are seen as clues to individual complexity rather than descriptors which can be "read." Most theorists agree that at least two-thirds of human communication is nonverbal. Thus, to know a person requires an evolving recognition of this large proportion of his/her communication. But such recognition occurs through the building of a relationship and it is a serious mistake to generalize these interpretations to a second person's behavior. Nonverbal messages are no less connotative than words. One person may cross his/her legs toward a companion as an indication of acceptance and rapport, while the same body positioning by another person may only reflect after-effects of last winter's skiing accident. Similarly, one person's frown may indicate disagreement, while another's means concentration, and another's discloses a lingering headache. Moreover, nonverbal meaningsare dependent on context. Studies have shown that a person who tilts the head while listening is indicating cooperativeness and receptiveness. While this may generally be true, the same head tilt in a partially deaf person indicates only an attempt to hear.

Similarly, the cry of a preverbal child can be interpreted only within the total context of the body--stiffness indicating a cry of anger or limpness revealing a cry of pain. Even emblematic gestures like a salute or a bow can show genuine respect or sarcastic rejection, depending on the context.

If one purpose of the humanities is to teach the arts of freedom, that purpose is served by encouraging freedom from labels. When guided by a humanities perspective, a student of nonverbal behavior learns that the only label which accurately describes any person is complex. By avoiding generalizations and honoring individual complexities, a student can go beyond hasty certainties and achieve cautious awareness.

2. Awareness of nonverbal signals should increase freedom of response. B. F. Skinner and other behaviorists believe that all human actions can be explained as conditioned reactions to external stimuli. But humanistic psychologists disagree. Viktor Frankl acknowledges that external conditions can be powerful and often beyond our control, but he believes freedom is achieved by controlling our responses to those conditions--thereby becoming "responsible."[4] Rollo May has discussed the human capacity to pause and assert self-control in the face of pressure; he has compared it to the moment of silent decision in which a diver takes self-command before a dive.[5]

When approached from a humanities perspective, the study of nonverbal communication should enhance the ability to pause, choose a response, and achieve freedom from external stimuli. From this perspective a student can read Michael Korda's Power! How to Get It, How to Use It--not as the how-to-gain-power manual for which it was intended, but as a means of self-defense.[6] Korda's descriptions of authoritarian arrangement of office space, strategic movements during business conferences, and invasion of

personal space to achieve dominance, succeed only when the prospective victim is unaware of the intended conditioning. Freedom from the stimulus-reaction pattern is achieved by understanding the stimulus, pausing, and choosing one's own response.

Applied in this way, information about nonverbal influences can be truly liberating. Teachers and students who understand the interaction limitations imposed by certain classroom arrangements can free themselves by rearranging the desks. Constituents who are intimidated by the formal office of an elected official can engage the official on neutral ground. Persons who recognize that physical contact reflects a wide range of intentions (many of them natural and healthy) can widen their range of responses, and thus break through cultural conditioning that defines all touching behavior as sinister or sexual. Not least, citizens, patients, and soldiers who recognize that uniforms and symbols of status inspire reflexive obedience can pause and make a decision before following orders. By encouraging the awareness that allows choice, the study of nonverbal patterns can further the arts of freedom--and thus serve the best tradition of the humanities.

3. Consciousness of nonverbal patterns can increase cross-cultural understanding. Edward Hall has explained in detail that cultures differ as much in nonverbal conceptions as in language patterns. Not only do people of divergent cultures interpret time and space differently, have different norms of communication distance and physical contact, practice different patterns of eye contact, and create vastly different living environments--Hall believes that people in varying cultures "inhabit different sensory worlds."[7] Thus, beyond surface behaviors, there are cultural distinctions in the way the brain filters and interprets experience.

Hall's body of work is a major contribution from contemporary social science and could be studied solely from the perspective of anthropology. However, a humanities perspective can complement the valuable information that Hall provides. Once the nonverbal differences between cultures are recognized, the next question requires a value judgment: "what should be our attitude toward these differences?" In the past, the answer of Americans has too often been: expect others to change and adopt our patterns. To this end, missionaries, traders, advisers, and soldiers have been dispatched. A humanities approach should include a historical perspective to remind us of the tragedy and uselessness of those attempts, and should draw from theology and philosophy to encourage acceptance instead of bigotry. In short, the social sciences can tell us of cultural differences, but the humanities must teach us to honor those differences. Just as the study of world literature and foreign languages includes an implicit recognition of the value of words unlike our own--so a humanities perspective should awaken respect for nonverbal patterns foreign to our experience. Appreciation of pluralism is one of the purposes which extends the humanities beyond "information, or skill, or propaganda."

4. Application of the research into nonverbal processes should enhance the quality of human life. The social sciences have produced most of the research into nonverbal patterns, but the humanities must provide the values which guide use of research findings. To ask whether behavior modification is a workable treatment for autism is a question for experimental psychology; but to ask if it is a life-enhancing approach and whether alternatives such as dance therapy and sign language should be pursued instead are questions of philosophy. Similarly, the techniques for using voice stress analysis

and voice prints have been perfected by technology, but the ethical and legal questions regarding their use require answers from the humanities.

The behavioral effects of spatial arrangements, color, and lighting in courtrooms, office buildings, prisons, hospitals, hospices, and nursing homes are the focus of numerous psychological and sociological studies. But application of the findings requires establishment of priorities guided by ethics, aesthetics, and a focus on the quality of life. Due to careful scholarship in the social sciences, much has been discovered about nonverbal patterns; now the humanities must explore what to do with what we know.

The work of William H. Whyte can be studied as an example of combining sociological information and humanistic values. As a landscape architect, Whyte urges that spatial awareness go beyond concepts of demography and efficiency and be leavened by a sense of history. He writes:

> It is significant that the cities doing best by their downtowns are the ones doing best at historic preservation and reuse. Fine old buildings are worthwhile in their own right, but there is a greater benefit involved. They provide discipline. Architects and planners like a blank slate. They usually do their best work, however, when they don't have one. When they have to work with impossible lot lines and bits and pieces of space, beloved old eyesores, irrational street layouts, and other such constraints, they frequently produce the best of their new designs--and the most neighborly.[8]

A humanities perspective should also go beyond the statistical research that correlates numbers and kinds of personal objects with personality traits. A deeper understanding of personal icons can be found in literature and memoirs, such as May Sarton's description of the crystal wine glass that survived the wartime destruction of her parents' home,[9] or her account of "taking possession" of a house by placing the accumulated artifacts of a lifetime in the otherwise lifeless rooms.[10]

At best, a humanities perspective can help a student respect the symbols and extensions of individual lives. When that happens, knowledge gained from research is tempered into appreciation and insight.

The preceding four premises are attempts to suggest a unifying, humanistic attitude toward a network of concepts. The humanities seek the wisdom that lies beyond facts. Frank P. Chambers once wrote of "the literate tradition" and cautioned: "the wisdom of the world may not always be in words. Some of it may be in things like the Parthenon or Chartres or the Sistine Chapel. And some of it may be in things like the deep, entrenched solidarity of an old and well-tried social system, in manners and mores, or in other indescribable behaviour patterns . . . ."[11]

The search for this wisdom is a life-long effort, but a humanities perspective in college classes offers a beginning. In the same year that Aldous Huxley urged the beginning of an interdisciplinary approach to nonverbal processes, Adlai Stevenson challenged the graduates of Princeton University to continue their own pursuit of such knowledge. In Stevenson's words:

> all of the observations about life which can be communicated handily in ready, verbal packages--are as well known to a man at twenty who has been attentive as to a man at fifty. . . .
>
> What he knows at fifty that he did not know at twenty . . . is not the knowledge of formulas, or forms of words, but of people, places, actions--a knowledge not gained by words, but by touch, sight, sound, victories, failures, sleeplessness, devotion, love--the human experiences and emotions of this earth and of oneself and other men; and perhaps, too, a little faith, and a little reverence for things you cannot see.[12]

Notes

[1] Adlous Huxley, The Doors of Perception (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 77.

[2] Lawrence C. Howard, "Teach Them the Arts of Freedom," in Teaching the Humanities, ed. Sheila Schwartz (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 347.

[3] Everett Dean Martin, The Meaning of a Liberal Education (New York: W. W. Norton, 1926), p. vii.

[4] Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963).

[5] Rollo May, Lecture at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, Feb. 8, 1978.

[6] Michael Korda, Power! How to Get It, How to Use It (New York: Random House, 1975).

[7] Edward Hall, The Hidden Dimension (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 2.

[8] William H. Whyte, The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (Washington, D. C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1980), p. 93.

[9] May Sarton, I Knew a Phoenix: Sketches for an Autiobiography (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959), pp. 81-82.

[10] May Sarton, Plant Dreaming Deep (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), pp. 43-50.

[11] Frank P. Chambers, Perception, Understanding and Society (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1961), p. 18.

[12] Adlai Stevenson, "The Educated Citizen," in Fundamentals of Public Speaking, ed. Donald C. Bryant and Karl R. Wallace (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), p. 522.